



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease that infects the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) of mammals, including humans. It is almost always fatal.

How is rabies spread?

Rabies is usually transmitted by the bite of a rabid animal. Rabies virus may produce behavioral changes in animals that make them more likely to bite. This helps transmit the virus to another animal. Rabies may also be transmitted when infected saliva comes in contact with an open wound, the eyes, or the mouth. There have been occasional transmissions between humans through cornea or organ transplants. A scratch from a rabid animal could transmit the disease because there might be virus infected saliva on its claws.

Which animals can transmit rabies?

Indiana animals considered to be at highest risk of transmitting rabies to humans include bats, skunks, foxes, raccoons, and coyotes. Bats are the most common

animal in Indiana reported to have rabies. Dogs and cats can also transmit rabies that they have acquired from wildlife, but they are very rarely found to be rabid in Indiana. Reptiles and birds never get rabies. Theoretically, rabbits, rats, mice, squirrels, chipmunks, and other small mammals can transmit rabies, but bites from these animals are not considered a rabies risk in Indiana at this time. Your local health department can help you evaluate the risk of rabies following an animal bite.

What are the symptoms of rabies in animals?

One of the first signs of rabies in an animal is a change in behavior. A usually calm animal may become aggressive, or a very active animal may seem depressed. Rabid wild animals can lose their fear of humans, and nocturnal animals might be seen during daylight hours.

In addition to different behavior, rabid animals can exhibit furious and/or paralytic ("dumb") rabies. Animals with furious rabies are aggressive and may attack other animals and even inanimate objects. *The furious stage does not occur in all rabid animals.* An animal with paralytic rabies seems uncoordinated and weak and has a "dull" or "vacant" expression. Weakness eventually leads to paralysis and death. In some rabid animals, paralysis of the muscles used for swallowing causes saliva to accumulate, which can result in drooling and foaming at the mouth.

What are the symptoms of rabies in humans?

Rabies in humans is very similar to that in animals. The first sign in humans often consists of a general feeling of apprehension and itching or tingling at the site of the bite. Other signs of rabies in humans include headache, weakness, paralysis, and death. Swallowing is often impossible due to paralysis of the throat muscles.

Who is at risk for rabies?

Anyone who has had an exposure to a rabid animal may be at risk for contracting rabies.

How can rabies be treated?

Once symptoms appear in humans, rabies cannot be cured. Rabies is almost always fatal; there have been only a few human rabies survivors, and almost all suffered permanent neurological damage. Therefore, efforts are focused on preventing exposure or providing immunity that will prevent disease in those exposed.

How is rabies prevented?

You can avoid being exposed to rabies by doing the following:

- don't attempt to pet animals unknown to you
- don't approach animals that are sleeping, injured, eating, or caring for young
- avoid contact with wild animals; enjoy them from a distance
- prevent wildlife from entering your house, garage, storage sheds, or other enclosed areas
- don't leave pet food out where it will attract wildlife
- keep garbage containers closed and secure
- **HAVE YOUR PETS VACCINATED AGAINST RABIES** – a vaccinated pet is a barrier between you and rabid wildlife

What should I do if an animal bites me?

If an animal bites you, there are a few simple steps you can take:

- Wash the wound with lots of soap and running water.
- Go to a physician or emergency room immediately if the bite is severe or bleeding.
- Notify your physician that an animal bit you.
- Make sure that you are up to date on your tetanus vaccination.
- Take antibiotics if your physician prescribes them.
- If possible and without causing further injury, try to identify or capture the biting animal.
- Notify your local health department or animal control agency. The animal may need to be tested or quarantined.

Can rabies disease be prevented?

If you are exposed to rabies, the disease can be prevented with appropriate immunization.

- Individuals who are in high-risk occupations (veterinarians, wildlife workers/rehabilitators, animal control personnel, and rabies laboratory workers) should be immunized with rabies vaccine prior to exposure. In some circumstances, international travelers should also be immunized against rabies prior to travel.
- Rabies can also be prevented by vaccination after an exposure has occurred but before symptoms develop (post-exposure prophylaxis). When given properly, post-exposure prophylaxis has been extremely effective in preventing rabies in humans bitten by known or suspected rabid animals.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to:

- Your local health department is an excellent source of general information on rabies, the occurrence of rabies in your county, the risk of rabies following an animal bite, and options for observation or testing of biting animals.
- Your veterinarian can advise you on how to protect your pets.
- For additional information on rabies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), go to

<http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/>

<http://www.in.gov/isdh/20518.htm>

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